

Ghost by Gazyrlezon

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Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

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Summary:

El is out on Halloween night, a ghost beneath a white sheet, collecting candy.

Ghost

Ghost. That, El supposed, was what she was, now; a large white bed sheet sliding through the world, hiding what was beneath. In a way, she thought it fit her. She was a ghost herself, after all, even without the sheet. Unseen. Hidden. Not there, and not where she would've wanted to be.

Except that now being a ghost was suddenly useful, too. Beneath the sheet she'd remain unseen and nameless. No one'd recognize her from just the eyes poking out through the two little holes that she'd cut into it. Well, no one except Hopper, but then again, he knew who and where she was anyways.

El was glad she'd thought of it so far in advance. Now, in retrospect, it seemed like there'd been no time at all between Mike first talking about trick-or-treating when she'd seen him, out in the emptiness of the mind-void, and her being here, outside, on a street populated by all sorts of weird or questionable creatures, but of course that wasn't true. Mike had first told her about his Ghostbusters costume more than a week ago, and El'd learned about what "Halloween" meant the day after that, on the TV, and then a day later again she'd made the her own costume. Ghostbuster, that sounded like it might have something to do with ghosts, and El knew what those were well enough. And so she'd dressed herself a ghost.

And then, after that, had come a half-week of arguments, shouted conversations and slow chiseling at the (almost) unyielding wall that was Jim Hopper. If she had thought of it later, if she hadn't had days to find rebuttals to every counterargument that he'd come up with, El didn't think he would've ever allowed it. But she'd been early enough, and she'd convinced him, and now here she was, sheet over her head and a bag already half-full with candy in her hand, walking along from door to door.

Faintly, she wondered if she'd been on this street, before. When she'd been in this town last. It was hard to be sure, given that it was dark, and that everything looked slightly different ... a year, it turned out, was a lot of time.

El checked the contents of her bag (but not by openly looking at it; the risk of the sheet slipping was too much; instead she lifted it upwards, just by an inch, which gave her an idea of how heavy it was). This whole occasion in itself was wondrous, she thought. Never before had El even imagined that something like this might be possible; there were uncounted monsters out on this street, and yet no one was really afraid. She'd go and ring doorbells, and then, when someone opened, try her best to scare them, but no one was ever truly frightened.

She found that she quite liked that. It made it easier, somehow; if no one was scared of these made-up monsters, then for a few moments she could pretend not to be scared by any of her much realer, much more powerful ghosts that she carried around with her.

A band of weird green paper creatures passed by her, chattering along, laughing. El might have no one to go with, but still; she was happy, too, as she walked along to the next house. Happier than most days, at least.

For a moment she turned her head, looking for Hopper. That was part of the complicated deal they'd worked out: he'd be there, amiably shattering with parents, pretending to be bored by this, pretending it was just another thing that he had to do as part of his job. He'd tell everyone who'd listen a long broad story about how there'd been complaints last year about children taking the *trick* in *trick-or-treat* a bit too far, so now he had to patrol the street, have an eye on everyone. And given that he wore his usual uniform, no one'd bat an eye when they saw the gun at his side — that, after all, was just part of the uniform, the get-up of how a policeman was supposed to look like.

The truth, of course, wasn't that, but it was convincing enough so that no one wondered why he was there.

After all, they couldn't see that it was loaded, and that the man who wore it was ready to pull and shoot at a moment's notice should any white vans drive down the street.

But as long as El stayed close to him, she was allowed out. It was still a risk, true, but after days of convincing him he'd said that maybe it

wasn't too stupid a risk. And if that arrangement meant that sometimes she had to skip a house or two to keep up with him, well, so what? She got out, and that was what counted. Well, that and the candy, of course.

El walked up the next few steps in front of the next door, and rung the bell. There was still an anxiety in the back of her mind every time she did that despite the number of houses she'd visited by now, and the number of candy she had to show for it; but still, right here and now she was going to meet another person, and for long years of her life that hadn't meant anything good. A few seconds passed, and El could, just for a moment, see her Papa's face flash over her while sensing footsteps that came closer. She chased it away again. Then the door opened.

"Whuuuuuuooooooooooooooooaaaaaa!" El screamed at the man behind, doing her best impression of a ghost. He laughed, and stuffed a handful of candy into her bag. *See?* No need to worry. It might be hard to remember sometimes, but this wasn't *there*, and now wasn't *then*.

"You're a scary one," he told her. El nodded seriously. She'd have liked to say something, of course, but ... *No talking*. Another rule that they'd agreed on.

The man didn't seem to mind too much.

"Well, run along. Bye!" He closed the door again. El smiled, secretly; no one but her knew it was there, beneath the sheet. *Ghost*.

It was several houses later when she first saw her friends, and stopped dead in her steps. *Mike!* She was on the verge of running towards him, hugging him, but ... *no talking*, she reminded herself. Not with anyone. *Especially* not with them.

So the El-ghost walked up another driveway, and rung another

doorbell. Got another handful of candy, turned around to see where Hopper was now, then went along to the next house along the road. And again. And again.

And again and again she found herself staring at Mike and his group of friends. She could hear them talking, could hear Dustin laughing out loud. *Happy*, she thought, and suppressed a tear. They wore matching costumes, of course, and ... and someone else was with them, too, whom El couldn't place. It struck her then, like a hammer blow; while she'd been living in the woods, while she'd helped Hopper to clean up the cabin and while she'd hidden there, the others had gone on with their lives, too. Of course she'd been somewhat aware of that, before; after all, she listened to what Mike told her, but ... it was only now that she truly understood it. That person right there, with the plastic mask and the long red hair peeking out from beneath? El didn't know who she was, but the person knew who Mike was. Had probably even spent more time with him than El ever had, come to think of it. It wasn't hard to know someone for more than a week, after all (*if you didn't have to constantly hide*).

For a moment or two El felt anger pulse through her. Why did she have to hide when some random girl could just walk up to Mike and his friends and join their group? Why couldn't El walk over to them, too? Why couldn't she be there, laughing along with them? It wasn't *right*. But it also wasn't safe.

Still, before she knew it, her feet had carried her dangerously close to her friends. Even without looking, she could feel Hopper tense and turn to glare at her. Shuddering, El stumbled to a halt.

But by then it was already too late. By then, they'd already noticed her. Dustin snapped some weird contraption towards her, which gave a sort of *clink*.

"Caught you!" He laughed.

El stood frozen. If she'd laughed along, if she even said so much as a single word ... her friends wouldn't tell, she was sure of it, but who else might be here to listen? With everyone beneath masks ... no, El could not risk it. So she remained there, silent. She knew she should

just go away and pretend that this had never happened, but ... but it was *hard*.

And Mike was there. Mike, who had kissed her. Back then she'd been mostly confused, even if she'd thought that it'd felt nice. Now, with all the TV and a rough idea of what it might've meant ...

Dustin still stared at her. "Can't you talk?" Then, after a moment of consideration, he added "sorry if I scared you. I'm Dustin, by the way."

I know, she wanted to say, *it's nice to see you*, but of course she couldn't.

"And I'm Lucas," Lucas added, quickly followed by a "Hi, I'm Will," and "I'm Max." The girl took her mask off for that, so El could see her face. Not that she looked; but for a moment El's eyes hovered over Will, whom she'd seen only once before, covered in slime and far away in the mind-void, caught in the Upside Down ... *safe, now*, she thought to herself, and smiled beneath her sheet. She suppressed the tears; those would've left stains in the blanket for everyone to see.

"And I'm Mike," said Mike, offering his hand. Without even thinking, El took it, shook it, and then froze again. *No talking!*

But, strictly speaking, she wasn't talking to him.

"I'm sorry if Dustin scared you, but you don't have to be afraid of him; he's actually really nice," Mike told her, his voice detached. *He thinks he's talking to stranger*, she realized. It should've been obvious, really, but it still hurt.

El considered the situation again. No one around them but Hopper had any chance of knowing who was beneath the ghost costume. Except ...

Her costume as really just a white sheet of cloth; her arms were bare when she stuck them out from under it. So, slowly, El turned the her hand around, until Mike could see the marking. *011*. His breath caught. El *concentrated*, and forced his mouth shut, at the same time taking a deep breath in so she could be sure that no blood would drip

down her nose and be visible from the outside.

No talking! she willed him to understand, and it seemed that he did. There was still a question on his face, though, a question full of hope. El nodded to answer it. A smile broke out on his face, broad and bright like sunshine. And although Mike couldn't see it, El smiled just the same. She released her hold on his mouth, and he didn't say anything dangerous.

In fact, when he realized how the others stared at the two of them, all he said was "Happy Halloween," before walking off with them. There was a slight crack in his voice, but El thought he'd made a good job of covering it up. She watched them walking away for a while. She could hear Lucas ask what had just happened, and Mike telling him that it'd just been a stupid mistake; but she could hear he didn't say it in a sincere voice. He knew whom he'd just met, and that would have to be enough. For now.

El turned to look at Hopper, but she didn't need his menacing glare to know that this was the farthest that she could take it. She'd gotten so close to just blurting out who she was, that she missed him, that she wanted to go home with him, just simply *be* with all of them ...

She branched off into a side street so she wouldn't run into them again, leaving Hopper to interrupt whatever conversation he was currently in to hurriedly following her. The next few doors passed in a blur. Her bag got a little heavier, but that was all that El noticed from them.

She didn't *hear* the scream, as such. Not how she could hear the voices of the other kids around her, or Hopper shouting at her as she started running, mindlessly. She was too far away from it for ordinary hearing. No, she *felt* the scream, felt it reverberating through the skin of the world itself. Or well, of *this* particular world; there were others, after all. Only, she knew that scream, and she knew that

voice. She'd heard it, not quite a year ago, shakily singing a song against a dead and rotten cosmos. She'd heard it just an hour ago, too, saying only three simple words. *Hi, I'm Will.*

Only, she'd thought he was *safe*, and that scream begged to differ. And so, Eleven *ran*. And ran.

She had only a vague idea of where she had to go, or ... no, that wasn't right; she knew *exactly* where to go, but not really how to go about it. She ran across someone's front garden, used backdoors and ways she hadn't even known where there. Once or twice, she almost ran into a wall and turned away only at the last possible moment. There was no orientation except a sure sense of where Will was, street layout be damned. While running, El pressed the ghost sheet tight to her head with her mind, or else it would've just gone flying from the wind alone.

When she found him, Will was shaking. Crying, thrashing, his eyes closed and he himself far away. She drew him out of it fast as she could, and by then Mike was there, too, holding his friend. Will's eyes flew open, fear written deep into them, on the verge of crying, his face a single distorted mask of terror.

El held him tight. "Safe," she whispered. "Now. Here. Mike." Slowly, Will seemed to understand; his breathing slowed down again, and his arms weren't thrashing as much anymore. The shuddering ebbed away, too.

"Mike," Will said, and let himself be drawn into a hug from his friend. El slowly backed away; Will was safe again now, wasn't he? wasn't he ...

Then, suddenly, she understood what she'd done. Not only had she talked, but also drawn everyone's attention on her while running. Any white ghost would be suspicious, after this. There was no way how she could continue going trick-or-treating.

As Lucas, Dustin and that new girl Max arrived El understood that she had to get away, and *fast*. Mike shouted after her, thankfully calling her *ghost* instead of using her name. The others, too, wanted to know what was going on. A few other kids stopped to look at her.

“Hey!” Chief Hopper’s booming voice cut through any potential babbling. “You, kid!” El took a moment to realize that he meant her. “You come with me now, okay?”

El was on the verge of screaming again; whenever he shouted like that, it was almost like ... no. It wasn’t, and El wouldn’t let her mind think that, not even for a single second. Still, the anxiety was there all the same.

“Sorry everybody,” Hopper shouted into the small crowd of onlookers, “but who doesn’t play by the rules gets a free ride home with me.”

“Didn’t actually think I’d have to take anyone, but it seems you kids are more of a pest than I’d realized,” he muttered, adding to the performance. Then he raised his voice again. “You, ghost-kid, come with me. Your mama’s not gonna be happy with you.”

Feeling limp, El followed him, winking back to her friends only once.

She’d fully expected him to scream at her, but once they got to the cabin hidden deep in the forest, Hopper merely held her as she cried.

Later, they ate candy together, and he promised again that she’d get to go out soon. That was a lie, of course, after weeks and months El knew that by now ... but it was a nice lie, and the candy was good, and El supposed that would have to be enough, for now.

Author's Note:

Got the idea while reading [Not Even Halfway Happy](#), which you should definitely go and read as well, it's a seriously good fic.